THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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THE OPIUM WAR
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BY THE WAY

To take up the objections about "England" being used to stand for "The United Kingdom":

The term understandably annoys those British who do not consider themselves to be English – but Englishmen still persist in using it in both speech and writing. Is this simply arrogant parochialism? Not really: it is the tail-end of a long-established habit.

For centuries, England was the seat of authority for most of the British Isles, and the name, therefore, became a generalized symbol for the whole nation. No one objected to Nelson's signal "England expects . . ." at Trafalgar. In 1897, a popular poet – quoted in Issue 1 – unashamedly declared:

England! England! England!
Girdled by ocean and skies.

Protests from the Scots – in 1830 some of them complained about William IV being called "IV" because there had only been one Scottish King William before him – were small scale until this century, too late to have much effect as yet. And foreigners, of course, have always happily used "England" without a second thought. For all these reasons, "England" became an unquestioned part of the spoken language, especially for Englishmen.

In writing, the situation is more complex. Though there is no excuse for unthinking references to "England" in a modern political context, writers attempting to re-create the flavour of the past tend to rely frequently on past usage – which explains *The British Empire*'s occasional use of "England." They also, at other times, want to be technically correct. The result is often apparent confusion – we included a warning note about it on the centre page of Issue 1.

But in fact there is seldom fear of misunderstanding. Englishmen will, therefore, go on saying "England" when they shouldn't. Historical writing has in the past reflected this and will no doubt go on doing so – when occasion demands – until usage changes.

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Cover: A French cartoon roundly condemns British efforts in the Opium War to enforce the profitable trade that had been banned by the Chinese Emperor.

THE OPIUM WAR

By Robert Hughes

The "Yellow Peril" has been a nightmare to the Western world for many decades. Some 50 years ago, opium was woven into the Western literary imagery of oriental evil: drugs, secret traps and lizard eyes glittering behind a lacquered screen. The fantasies epitomized by Sax Rohmer's Dr. Fu Manchu struck deep. One result has been that most people who know the Opium War of 1839–42 only by name would naturally suppose the British waged it to free China from opium: a whiff of grapeshot sterilizing the poppy's fume; the whole affair in line with so-called "Victorian morality" on drugs.

The truth was the exact opposite. The British Empire was the world's largest grower, processor and exporter of opium, and China was its main market. The English fostered addiction in China, got a virtual monopoly of the drug, and blundered into war largely to defend their profits against an Emperor who was struggling to stamp out the trade. In 1839, the importation and use of opium had been illegal in China for more than a century. Her Majesty's Government had no clear-cut opium policy for China but was determined to protect its interests in India, where its opium grew. For opium was the hard political currency of the Far East, and England had made it so.

In 1876 an observer summed up the situation: "The East and the West, England, India and China, act and react on each other through the medium of poppy-juice." It had been true for 50 years. In 1875, the Indian Empire's income (in round figures) was £40 million, the equivalent of £320 million today. Of that, £12½ million or 32 per cent came from two English monopolies, salt and opium, originally acquired by the British East India Company, while £6½ million came from opium sales alone – nearly 17 per cent of India's gross national income.

The opium poppy provided the East India Company's most lucrative – and evil – export.

That £6½ million was as much as England spent on all public works, education, transport, communications and administration of justice in the vast subcontinent of India in 1873. Politically, the British Raj was as addicted to opium as any 30-pipe-a-day coolie. Had China cut off the trade, the economic withdrawal symptoms could well have shaken the Indian Empire to bits. Hence the Opium War.

"If the Chinese must be poisoned by opium, I would rather they were poisoned for the benefit of our Indian subjects than for the benefit of any other exchequer," Sir George Campbell said in the House of Commons in 1880; he proclaimed a policy that two generations of imperial administrators had acted on but not so bluntly voiced.

This, at least, was better than the hypocrisy which mantled most English debates on the Chinese opium issue. Sir Rutherford Alcock, who had lived in Canton for 25 years, was a leading "expert." In 1857 and 1871 he testified to the British government that opium was "seriously demoralizing and enervating to the population of China – a source of impoverishment and ruin to families." By 1881 he had switched; he informed a parliamentary committee that "opium is in no way more injurous than any other narcotic, and is suited to the Chinese as whisky is to the English and hemp to others." But by then, Sir Rutherford had become the director of Dent & Company, one of the three largest opium-exporters in the Far East.

Yet it would caricature history to see the British government as a frock-coated Mafia, degrading China with drugs for bloated profits. One must remember that opium was the aspirin of Europe. The English took it copiously: in 1840 the average annual intake was slightly over one quarter-ounce per person. Doctors prescribed it for hysteria, travel sickness,

Galby's Carminative was one of the many opium-bearing tinctures with which Victorian mamas dosed their fretful children.

toothache, neuralgia, flu, cholera, hay fever, ulcers and insomnia. In 1830 England imported 22,000 pounds of opium (but the corresponding figure for China was a million pounds, or nearly 450 *tons*) and by 1850 British consumption had more than trebled.

King George IV's doctors prescribed opium as a hangover cure; Coleridge wrote *Kubla Khan* on it; Berlioz ate some, vomited for two hours, and emerged from his experience with the inspiration for the *Symphonie Fantastique*. The lowest took it as freely as the most exalted. Opium was used as pain-killer and memory-wiper wherever the "dark satanic mills" stood – in Birmingham, Lancashire, Sheffield and Nottingham – and by the rural workers of Yorkshire, Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire. The English proletariat took it to escape from the atrocious monotony and fatigue of their work: opium, to reverse Marx, was the religion of the people. Nor did addiction necessarily impede a lifetime of concentrated effort. Clive of India was an addict for 20 years. William Wilberforce, the anti-slavery crusader, took opium every day for 45 years. Children were raised on it. If an infant cried, the Victorians dosed him with soothing tinctures: McMunn's Elixir, Mother Bailey's Quieting Syrup, Batley's Sedative Solution, Godfrey's Cordial. These contained up to ½ grain of opium per fluid ounce, and often quieted the child forever.

Thus at the time of the Opium War, there could have been few Englishmen who had not taken opium for relief or stimulus. Add to this the lack of public interest in the politics of so remote and exotic a land as China and it is no surprise that the British public, in so far as it knew about China's predicament at all, were indifferent to it. What was sauce for the English goose would certainly do for the Peking duck.

There is a further point, more important. The British war must be seen in the context of its time. Just as the Chinese side was ignored by Victorian writers, British grievances have fallen from grace today: but not all of them were the pompous sensitivities of an exploiter-race, and opium was not the sole cause of the war.

Its origins lay far back, within the Chinese Empire itself. In the 18th Century, this Empire was the largest and oldest in the world. Its foreign policy was modelled on the Confucian pattern of family hierarchy. Other nations – Vietnam, Burma, Korea – were mere tributaries to the Celestial Throne; their ambassadors came regularly to Peking to make the "three kneelings and nine prostrations"; for more than 3,000 years, the Chinese had dealt with all other states, when they dealt at all, as inferiors.

And so, when English traders arrived in the 18th Century and presented their royal credentials, Chinese officials treated them as ignorant barbarians come to pay tribute. There was no question of equal diplomatic standing. The fact that another Empire was growing thousands of miles away, stronger, richer and incomparably more developed in technology, would not have seemed possible to the Emperor. He embodied the Will of Heaven; barbarians did not.

The Victorians have been rightly castigated for their insensitivity to Chinese forms and customs. But nothing surpassed the arrogant myopia with which China eyed the barbarians. What was there to look at? Why should a superior man study an inferior? All Britain wanted, initially, was an equitable trade relationship with China, so that it could capture the lion's share of the dragon's market. To the Emperor there could be no such equity: that would have violated the immutable *tao*, the Way of Heaven. "In his eyes," wrote a distressed British consul in 1847, "we are all barbarians, possessing perhaps some good qualities, congregated together perhaps in some sort of societies, but without regular government, untutored, coarse and wild."

Britain was refused the normal courtesies of diplomacy and trade which every Western state extended to its fellows. The wound of this went deep. It was time the Celestials learnt a lesson.

The Throne's superciliousness is best shown in the Emperor Ch'ien-lung's response to the Macartney mission in 1793. King George III, anxious to secure a footing in China, sent Lord Macartney to Peking to ask for equal representation and free trade, a British trading port, and

a permanent embassy in the capital. The British wanted to sell the Chinese their Indian cotton, and buy tea and silk. Opium was not yet a major issue, and Macartney, like his failed predecessor Cathcart in 1787, was briefed to state (if need be) that the East India Company would forbid the export of Indian "ophium" to China. The Company certainly meant to keep its word – provided it got its facilities.

But it did not get them. The Emperor sent Macartney back to George III with a letter. There would be no commissioner or embassy in Peking: "How can our dynasty alter its whole procedure and system of etiquette to meet your individual views?" There was already a trading port, Canton, where barbarians could do business; but even that was a sign of imperial indulgence, for "as your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures. . . . But as the tea, silk and porcelain which the Celestial Empire produces are absolute necessities to the European nations and to yourselves, we have permitted, as a signal mark of favour, that foreign *hongs* [trading companies] should be established at Canton." If England got its own port, George III was told, "other nations would imitate your evil example and beseech me to present them . . . with a site for trading."

Nevertheless, Ch'ien-lung consolingly added, he was not *offended* by these wheedlings from a barbarian king: "I do not forget the lonely remoteness of your island, cut off from the world by intervening wastes of sea, nor do I overlook your excusable ignorance of the usages of our Celestial Empire." But there would be no English trade at Ningpo, Chusan, Tientsin or anywhere on the coast except Canton and Macao; nor could tariffs be reduced. "Do not say you were not warned in due time! Tremblingly obey and show no negligence!"

Macartney had failed; he did not go in low enough. The only way an envoy could approach the Celestial Throne was in supplication, as a vassal. When Lord Amherst tried to visit the Emperor in 1816, he obstinately refused to make the nine prostrations and was sent back without an audience. On the other hand, when an Italian trade mission *did* make the right obeisances, the Emperor promptly claimed Italy as part of the Celestial Empire. There was, it seemed, no way of winning. It was the frustration of dealing with a contemptuous Chinese bureaucracy that killed Lord Napier after three months as trade superintendent in Canton, in 1834. The Chinese flatly refused to recognize his credentials as representative of the Crown, and would not communicate with him directly; by imperial statute, all Napier's requests had to go through a cartel of Cantonese businessmen, the so-called "*hong* merchants."

The most galling truth was that Ch'ien-lung was right about Anglo-Chinese trade. China's economy *was* self-sufficient; it did not need English goods, but the English needed Chinese tea and silk – though not, as Ch'ien-lung thought, as items of survival, but for the profits that could be made from their resale. Between 1792 and 1809, China's exports were twice her imports. The East India Company shipped £16½ million in goods to China, and brought back £27 millions' worth – a trade deficit of £10½ million. This was partly reduced by Company receipts from England in silver bullion totalling £2½ million – the Chinese merchants liked to be paid in metal. But the net imbalance was £8 million, and with the Napoleonic wars a chronic shortage of silver coin had struck England. How, then, to pay the Chinese for tea and silk? The answer was opium.

Opium was known in China long before the English arrived. Its source, the red poppy known as *Papaver somniferum*, was probably introduced by Arab traders. Arabs were running a trading station in Canton as early as A.D. 300, and by A.D. 620 these singular adventurers were striving to convert China to Islam. The first Chinese word for opium, *ya-pien*, appears at about this time; like the later Ming dynasty name for it, *a-fu-yung*, it derives from the Arabic *afyun*, which comes in turn from the Greek *opion*.

The drug's early history was predominantly medical. A staple of Greek medicine, it entered the Arab pharmacopoeia when the legacy of classical science passed to the Arab doctors. If Arabs did introduce the poppy to China, it probably came as a medicine, not as a staple of trade. By the 10th Century opium was well-known to Chinese doctors and mentioned in every herbal treatise. Taken as liquor from boiled poppy-seeds, it could alleviate senility, cure dysentery, ease pain – and also "kill like a knife".

The Chinese artist who drew this cartoon of a fire-breathing British "foreign devil" clearly reflected his countrymen's dislike of the barbarians from overseas.

A FRUITLESS MISSION

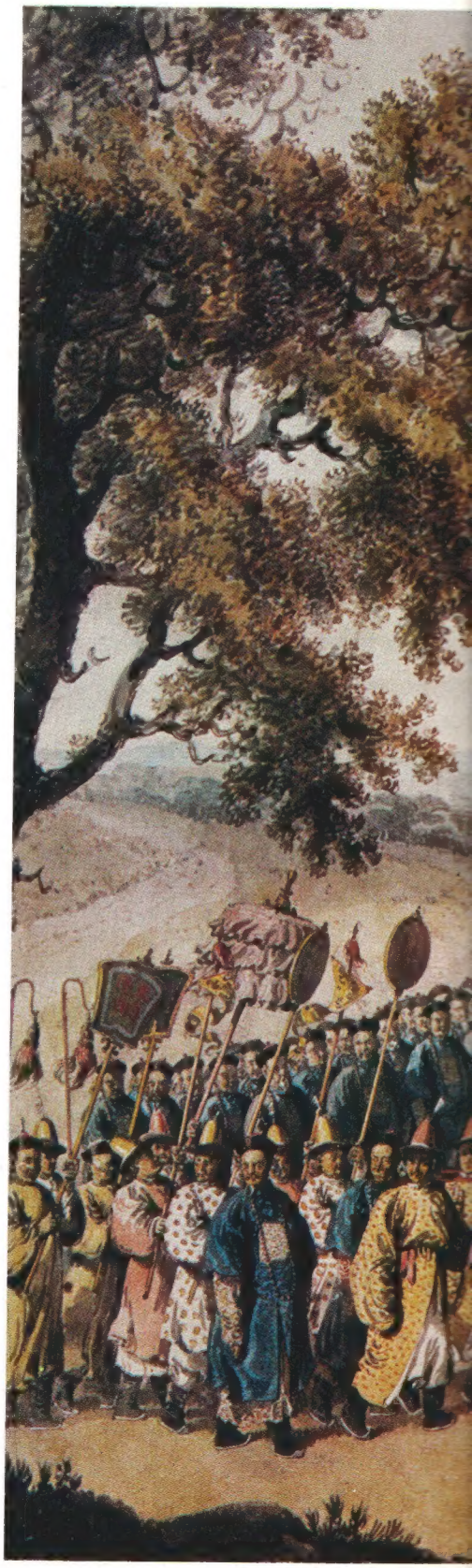
When Lord George Macartney (right), heading Britain's first diplomatic mission to China, passed through Peking (below) in August, 1793, he was sure he could soon fulfil his task of negotiating a formal trade agreement with the Emperor. Undaunted by the capital's towering guard-houses – and by the noise and stench of the inhabitants – encouraged by the unfailing graciousness of Chinese officials, confident in his well-proven diplomatic skills, he pressed on northwards to meet the Emperor in Jehol, his summer residence, happily unaware of the frustrations to come.

The British Rebuffed

Macartney had carefully chosen a retinue of guards, musicians and scientists to impress the Emperor, and an artist – William Alexander – travelled with him to record the visit. But the Emperor, Ch'ien-lung, Son of Heaven, who was now impassively awaiting the British in Jehol's Garden of Countless Trees, was not to be impressed. He considered the English – and for that matter all foreigners – to be barbarians, incapable of wisdom, vassals whose presents were no more than the tribute that was due to him.

At the first audience with the Emperor, Macartney amply demonstrated his ignorance – in Chinese eyes – when he insisted on kneeling, as he would to his own sovereign, rather than prostrating himself as was the Chinese custom. Despite this, Ch'ien-lung gave them welcome due to all guests. They were shown the gardens, were treated to banquets, were accompanied to plays and exhibitions. But nothing more. Two weeks passed; the Emperor's stay in Jehol neared its end; and all Macartney's efforts at discussing diplomacy were met only with polite but unyielding condescension.

Because Chinese soldiers carried bows and wore a protective leather skirt, the British thought them harmless and effeminate.



James Gillray's cartoon, done before Macartney left England, predicted with uncanny accuracy the cool Chinese reaction to Macartney's proposals and to the ingenious gifts he brought.

Preceded and flanked by mandarins who proclaim his virtues, the Emperor is borne forward to meet the British. The audience was held in a tent, an informal setting chosen so that Macartney's apparent ignorance of Chinese protocol could be passed over without comment.

The 84-year-old Emperor Ch'ien-lung, who lived on for another six years, was in Macartney's words "affable, dignified . . . a very fine old gentleman, not having the appearance of a man of more than 60."

Failure and Farewell

When the imperial retinues and the British returned to Peking, Macartney presented the Emperor with further gifts: clocks, chandeliers and astronomical instruments. He seemed delighted. That, however, was the last Macartney saw of him. A final attempt to open negotiations was met only by the same dead-pan smiles. Dejected, the British set off back to the coast, travelling across country along the Grand Canal. As usual, the Chinese officials acted with punctilious politeness, even providing two cows to give milk for English-style cups of tea. More baffled than ever, Macartney set sail for home.

The East India Company had spent £78,000, and for what? – a few curios (silk, jade, books, slippers) and an imperial edict to George III, prepared before the British ever arrived, exhorting the British sovereign to "swear perpetual obedience." The problems of the China trade were as far from solution as ever.

Preceded by these official junks, the British set off south to Canton along the 850-mile Grand Canal, which struck the British as "the grandest inland navigation in the whole world."

George III read with amazement that Ch'ien-lung considered him a vassal ruler.

A mandarin rode after Macartney bearing the imperial edict in a bamboo tube.

II. Exporting the "Pernicious Drug"

Opium left its traces in Chinese literature, as a provoker of ecstatic reveries and hallucinations, but there is no evidence of an addiction problem among Chinese peasants, or at the imperial Court; and there was no significant vogue for it among the elite of scholar-officials and poets, who preferred to get roaring drunk on rice wine. The use of opium as a widespread, addictive, pleasure-giving indulgence came to China from the West. The Chinese had to learn to *smoke* it.

Opium is a flexible drug. It can be taken anally or orally (as laudanum tincture, infusion, pills or raw lumps), injected in solution, or even – according to one 17th-Century writer – rubbed into the fresh bites of horse-leeches behind the ears to kill the pain. All these crude methods have drawbacks. Thus the opium-eater encounters a delay as the drug acts on his system, and this lag, combined with variations of narcotic content in different batches of drug, means he cannot delicately regulate his dose to his own convenience.

The smoker, however, can "tune" his intake precisely: a pipe takes five or six breaths to finish; anything from one to twenty pipes may be consumed, according to curiosity or need; the human lung absorbs the narcotic into the blood, and thence to the brain, faster than the stomach or gut, so that the effect comes faster and the smoker knows how far to go. Moreover, the ritual of smoking – the rolling of the black glutinous pellet, its impalement on a needle, the ceremonious burning, the handling of the pipe, the luxurious draw – is pleasant, especially to a formalistic culture like China's.

But the idea of inhaling smoke was unnatural to man until tobacco, a plant unknown in China and Europe, was discovered. Spanish colonists brought it from America to the Philippines; merchants from Fukien brought it in their junks to China. In the 17th Century, the last Ming Emperor, followed by the Manchu dynasts, tried to stamp out tobacco smoking on moral grounds. But they failed, and meanwhile the habit of mixing opium with tobacco, which had originated in the Dutch East Indies, spread to China. The first opium dens were seen on Formosa. From there,

Indian opium for shipment to China was grown in two main areas: Bihar, administered by the East India Company, and Malwa, under native Indian control.

opium smoking firmly established itself on the mainland.

Dutch and Portuguese traders supplied opium to China; some they imported from Turkey, most from India. It was not a major part of their trade. In the early 18th Century, when smoking was still virtually confined to Formosa, the Portuguese could unload no more than 200 chests a year there – about ten tons. But it so stupefied the Formosan workers and officials that the Emperor, thousands of miles away in Peking, could no longer ignore the reports. This dynast, Yung Ch'eng, issued an edict against opium in 1729. The basic punishment for smoking, or even owning a pipe, was public humiliation, 100 strokes of the bamboo rod, and exile to the inland frontier. (The flogging could kill a man; it left one's back a flayed tangle of muscles and exposed bone.) Keepers of opium dens who "entice the sons of respectable families to smoke" were to be strangled.

Yung Ch'eng's edict did not work. By 1767, the Chinese demand for the drug suggested to the East India Company a way to pay for Chinese tea and silk while stopping the leakage of bullion from England. The solution was first proposed by a Mr. Watson, at a meeting of the Company in Calcutta. The Company adopted the plan, noting its precedent in Portuguese opium dealing. Up to 1794, when Macartney's mission failed, the Company made various unprofitable opium runs which in the best year brought in only 400 chests.

Then, in 1794, the Company dispatched a freighter to Whampoa, which lay 13 miles down-river from Canton. Ignoring the Emperor's commands to George III, it remained anchored offshore for a year, selling opium to smugglers. There was some trading at Macao, but for the next 25 years Whampoa was the chief port for the drug. By 1820 the yearly consumption of opium had risen tenfold, to 4,000 chests, despite a flurry of edicts and threats from Peking. In 1821, the opium merchants withdrew from Macao and Whampoa and set up their trade station under the lee of Lintin Island, at the mouth of the Canton River. By now, a complete shuttle system had developed: large, armed British hulks formed a floating depot of storehouses, receiving

cargoes from opium clippers and off-loading into the "scrambling dragons," fast galleys armed with bowchaser cannon and grappling-irons, which ferried it "secretly" to the mainland. The Chinese authorities issued regular proclamations, whenever a clipper arrived, warning the foreign devils to sail away before "the dragons of war . . . with their fiery discharges, annihilate all who oppose this edict." Nobody, of course, took the least notice of this formal rhetoric.

Most of the opium was ferried 40 miles upriver to Canton itself, the only town open for foreign trade. Here were crowded along the waterfront the "factories" – the trading stations – of the East India Company and of French, Dutch and American merchants. Seen from the river, across the hundreds of junks and sampans lining the wharf, the factories looked small – they were crowded into a line only a quarter of a mile long – but they all stretched back over 100 yards towards Canton's suburbs to the north.

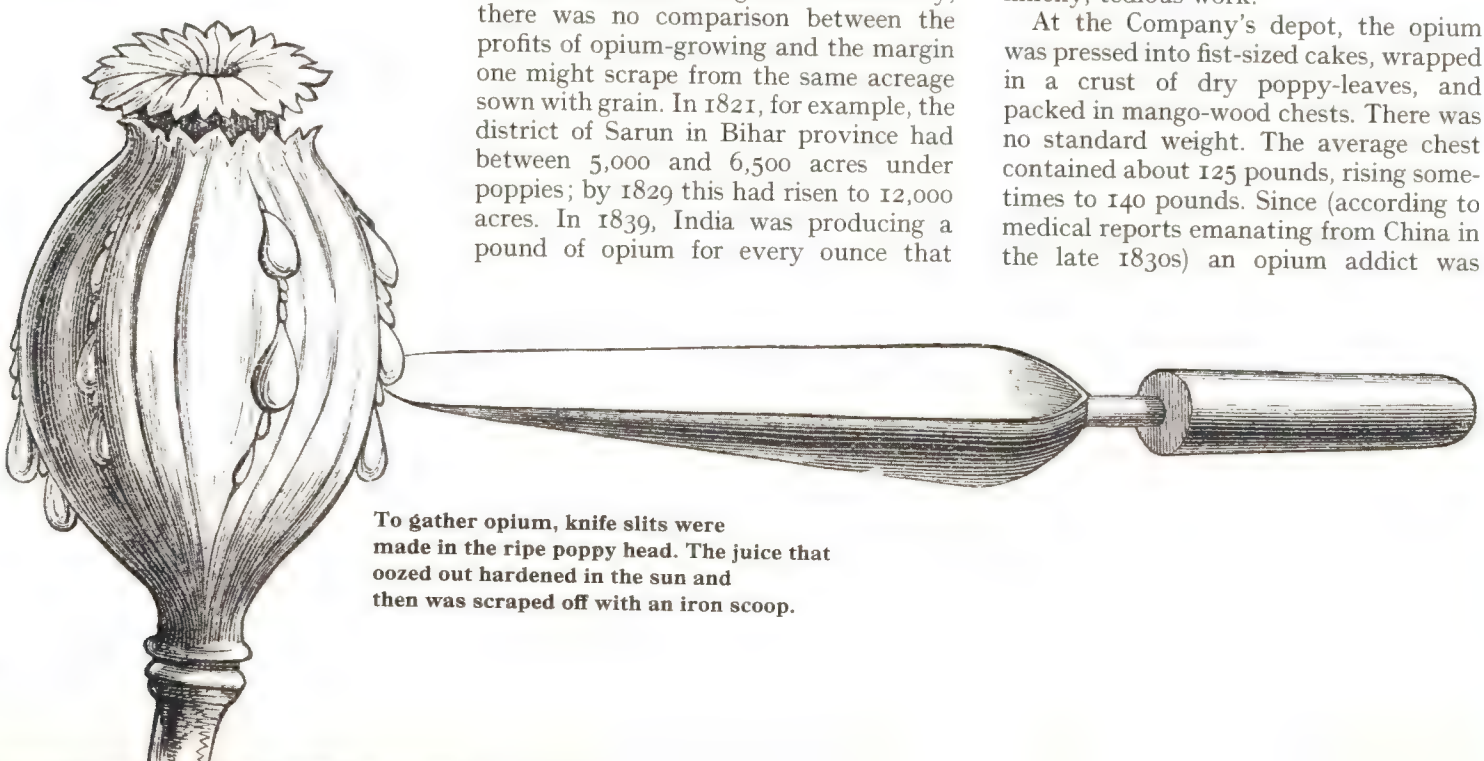
Few Europeans could step outside their factories without learning afresh of the distaste with which they were regarded by the Chinese. A foreign vessel on the river would draw a crowd of people, pointing, laughing and showing by signs how they would like to cut the foreign devils' throats. One Chinese scholar said the Europeans reminded him of water buffaloes in the rice fields: he could never distinguish one from the other. Their clothes, lacking the dignity and grace of Chinese drapery, merely emphasized their jerky movements. It was not surprising that, despite the demand for opium, the Chinese dealt with the barbarian traders only through the *hong* merchants; by 1821, this system had been thoroughly adapted to the marketing of opium.

British merchant vessels, moored in full view of Canton, peacefully unload their illegal cargoes of opium without any risk of interference from conniving Chinese officials.

What of the opium supply? Opium had long grown in India, but the East India Company turned it into an immense industry. No land in the provinces of India, Bihar and Benares could be sown with poppies without the Company's permission, and not an ounce of opium could leave India without passing through the Company's control. Between them, Indian landlords and the Company turned over increasing tracts of land to opium. This was the best land: *Papaver somniferum* is a delicate bloom, needing rich soil and constant irrigation. Obviously, there was no comparison between the profits of opium-growing and the margin one might scrape from the same acreage sown with grain. In 1821, for example, the district of Sarun in Bihar province had between 5,000 and 6,500 acres under poppies; by 1829 this had risen to 12,000 acres. In 1839, India was producing a pound of opium for every ounce that came from its nearest competitor, Turkey.

The soil was ploughed three times and weeded, then scored with a grid of irrigation-dykes. Poppy-seeds were sown in November; in March, the flower shed its petals and was ready. Its bulbous seedcases were slit with hooked knives; if the farmer could not afford such tools, he used a freshwater mussel shell. White juice oozed all night from the slit pod and the next day's sun hardened it into a dark sticky gum. This raw opium was scraped off, collected, and delivered to the village officers. The exudation could not be hurried and a farmer might gather no more than an ounce each day. It was finicky, tedious work.

At the Company's depot, the opium was pressed into fist-sized cakes, wrapped in a crust of dry poppy-leaves, and packed in mango-wood chests. There was no standard weight. The average chest contained about 125 pounds, rising sometimes to 140 pounds. Since (according to medical reports emanating from China in the late 1830s) an opium addict was



To gather opium, knife slits were made in the ripe poppy head. The juice that oozed out hardened in the sun and then was scraped off with an iron scoop.

expected to consume 40 grains a day, one chest represented a month's supply for 8,000 addicts.

But to grasp the human meaning of such figures, one should remember that addiction could come from 20 or even 10 grains a day; at 40 grains a day an addict is in a very bad way, and it is possible that the opium brought in from India and Turkey, together with that grown in China, had created somewhere between 10 to 12 million addicts in China by the 1840s.

Significantly, the East India Company always strove to minimize addiction *in India*. Its Court of Directors wrote in 1817 to the Governor of Bengal, expressing the hope that his measures "will tend to restrain the use of this pernicious drug, and that the regulations for the *internal* sale of it will be so framed as to prevent its introduction to districts where it is not used. . . . Were it possible to prevent the use of the drug altogether, except for the purposes of medicine, we would gladly do it in compassion for mankind." The message really was: don't drug *our* peasants; they won't work so hard. In the year they penned these nobly unctuous words, the directors had sold over 500,000 pounds of opium to the China smugglers.

The Indian *ryot*, or sharecropper, did not own his land: it belonged to the Company. When the crop was ripe, the *gomastah* (or Company overseer) toured the fields and assessed what each holding should yield. The *ryot* had to deliver this estimate as a minimum, at a price fixed before the harvest. If for any reason he failed to achieve the norm, he could be sued for embezzlement.

In Benares and Bihar the *ryots* were, in fact if not name, the East India Company's serfs. If a farmer refused to grow opium (preferring, say, grain or beets) the Company's agents could forcibly "capitalize" him by throwing a handful of rupees into his hovel and holding him under house arrest – during which he could farm nothing – until he submitted. Such a man had no chance of paying back the enforced loan. He was paid, in 1839, $3\frac{1}{2}$ rupees – at the then rates of exchange, 6 shillings – for a *seer* ($29\frac{1}{2}$ oz.) of raw opium. Hence he could hope to earn rather less than threepence a day during the harvest, which rarely lasted more than a fortnight. A sharecropper with a wife and three able-bodied children might hope to gain 13 shillings as his year's income from growing *Papaver somniferum*.

In 1837 it cost the Company about £15 to produce a chest of opium on its own territory and bring it to Calcutta. There it was auctioned to exporters and smugglers, loaded into the opium clippers and dispatched to China.

Theoretically, the Company's responsibility for the opium ended at the Calcutta wharves, and since its authority emanated from the British government, this was a useful moral escape hatch for both. Of course, the government knew about Chinese resentment over the smuggling trade; but it still adopted the Company's opium policy as its own: a House of Commons committee reported in 1831 that "the monopoly of Opium in Bengal supplies the Govt. with a revenue amounting to £981,293 per annum; and the duty amounts to $301\frac{3}{4}\%$ on the cost of the article. In the present state of the revenue it does not appear advisable to abandon so important a source of revenue."

From 1800 to 1837, the Company reaped an average profit of 465 per cent from its opium auctions in Calcutta; in 1820, it made nearly 700 per cent. The total export of opium from Calcutta rose from 1,070 chests in 1796 to 12,977 in 1835. But this represented only half of the Indian opium supply to China. The rest was Malwa opium, produced by Indian firms located outside the area under Company control and auctioned and shipped from Bombay. But the Company got its cut there, too. To reach Bombay from Malwa in the north, the opium had to cross Company territory, and a transit tax was imposed on it. This tax brought profits almost as great as those from growing opium. It began at £20 a chest in the 18th Century, rising to £30 and finally to £43 in 1847. In 1835 the tax return from Malwa opium was nearly £320,000.

In this way the Company had the independent Indian growers nicely trapped. If Malwa opium went up in price, British opium from Patna and Benares would force it off the China market. So the independents had to make do with profits half as large as the Company's (albeit a handsome 200 per cent). Besides, the Chinese dealers preferred Benares and Patna opium to Malwa: it was finer and purer. The *ryots* who worked for independent dealers were apt to mix their opium with a variety of sticky, dark substances, from molasses to cow dung. English merchants kept stricter controls.

In 1830, a missionary at Canton noted the booming trade off Lintin Island: "fear of [the smugglers'] *cannon balls* effectively prevents the Chinese war junks from interfering with them . . . the boats are but seldom interfered with, nor are they likely to be, so long as the *Free Traders* can afford to pay the Mandarins so much better for not fighting, than the Government will for doing their duty." The smugglers even sailed under British flags, thus tacitly claiming (and usually getting) the support of the Navy; and by 1838 the trade was so open that the *Chinese Repository* reported:

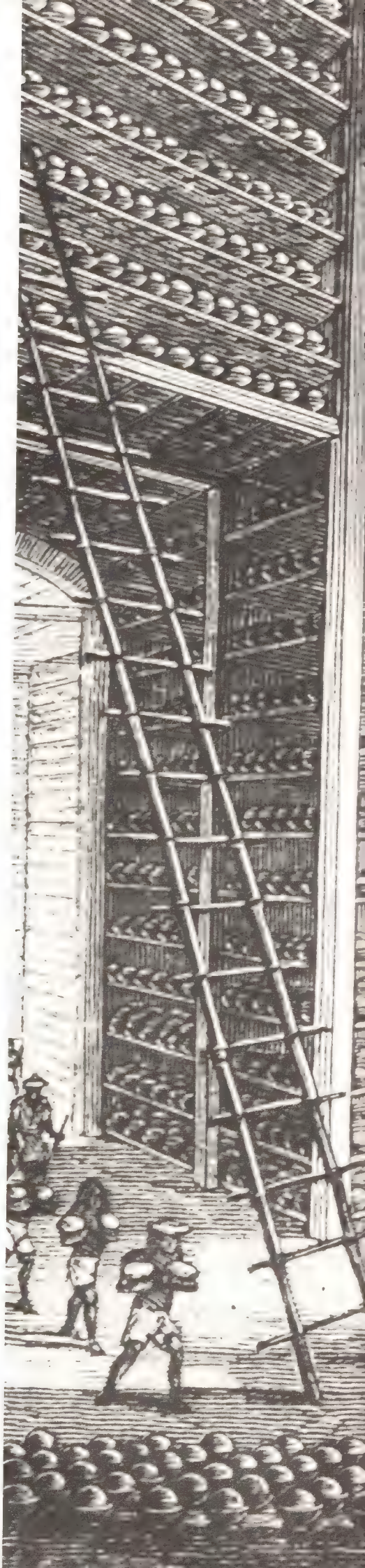
"The Chinese coast from Macao to Chusan is now the constant cruising ground of twenty opium ships. . . . In Macao, besides several houses engaged in the sale of opium on a large scale, fifty or sixty smaller dealers distribute it by the catty or cake; and the preparation of the drug for smoking . . . gives employment to ten times that number of Chinese. At Canton the foreign residents, with two or three uninfluential exceptions, are all identified with the opium trade . . . it is now rare to meet a native who is not involved in its purchase, or whose opposition to it is not disarmed by the knowledge that it is the daily business of his friends and relatives."

Because so many Cantonese were involved in the opium business as middlemen, dealers, processors and smokers, the English traders enjoyed their support. In fact, Chinese sentiment in Canton did not turn against the English until 1841, when the hardships of war made themselves felt; and so the Emperor's commands were impossibly hard for the Government officials (most of whom were bribed anyway) to carry out. By now, opium had cancelled out China's favourable trade balance. It paid for tea. The drain on China's silver reserves threatened inflation and there was great friction at talks between the official envoys of Peking and London in Canton

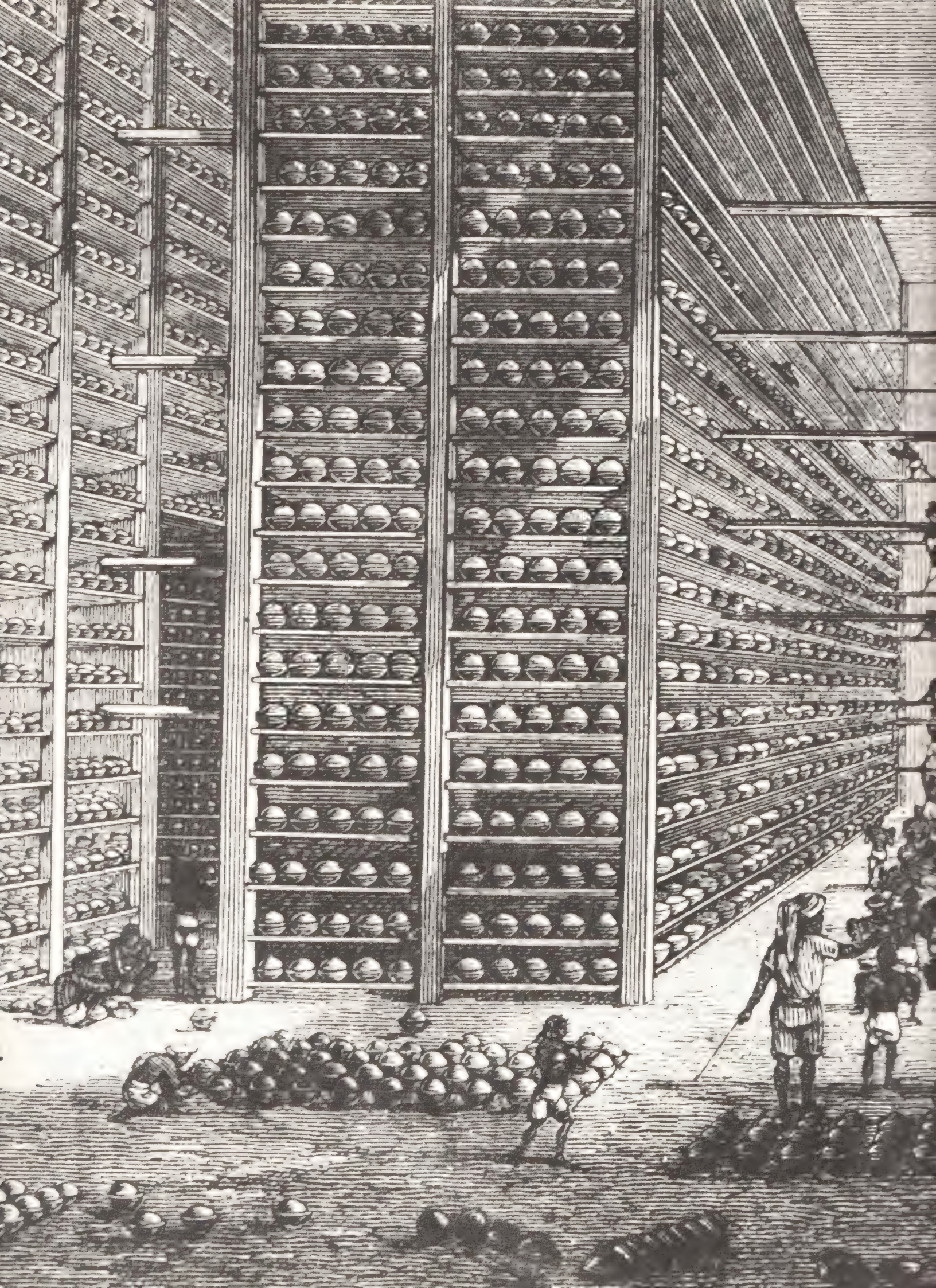
TRADERS IN OBLIVION

In the early 19th Century the East India Company's opium trade became a smoothly running business operation worth a million pounds a year. In hundreds of villages scattered across Bihar and Malwa, Indian peasants harvested the raw opium, the juice that oozed out of the slit pods of opium poppies. Then, in vast factories, Company workers formed the sticky gum into balls, wrapped the balls in poppy leaves and stacked them to dry on towering shelves, ready to be smuggled into China.

Indians check the weight of the two-pound balls of opium. An expert produced 100 balls a day.



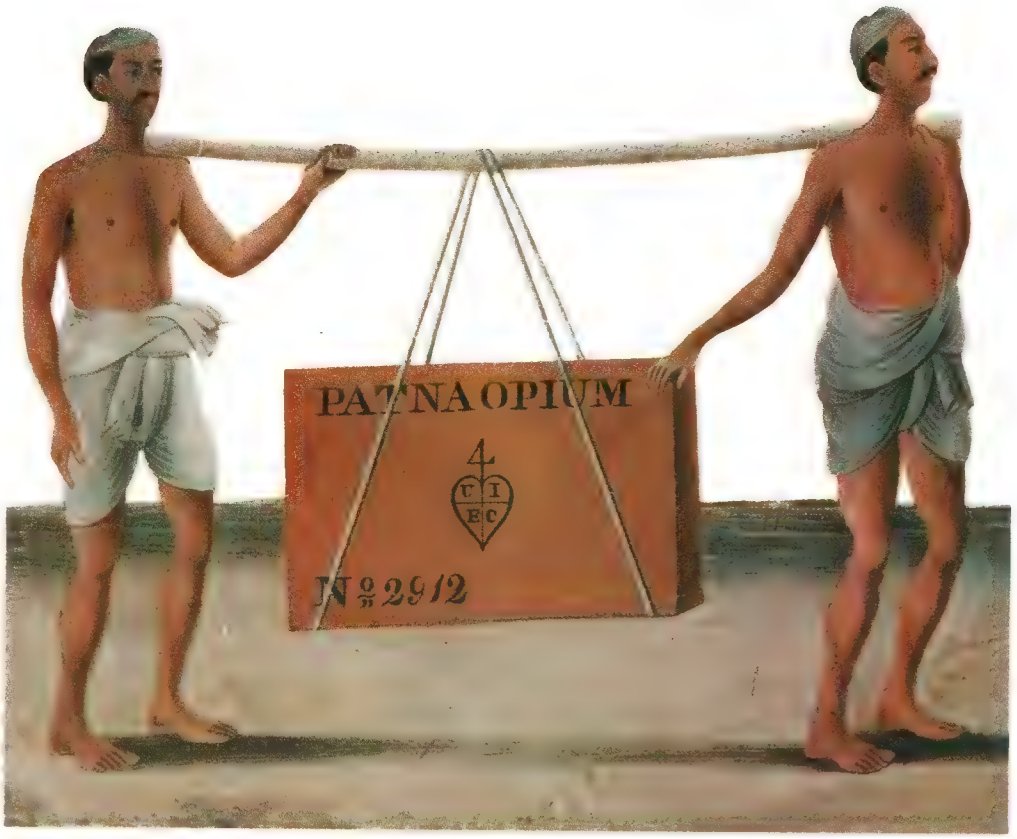
In the factory's stacking room, thousands of balls lie ready to be exported to Canton. Indians continually turned the balls and dusted them with crushed opium petals to keep them free of mildew and insects.



Shipping "Foreign Mud"

When dry, the opium was packed into chests and shipped to Calcutta. Then, in a transaction which tellingly underlined the hypocrisy of the Company's role, the opium was auctioned off to other firms in order to save the Company direct involvement in smuggling. Yet, by the terms of their licences, granted by the Company, the traders who bought it were forbidden to carry anything other than East India Company opium.

Trade boomed. Fast, manœuvrable opium clippers, introduced in 1829, guaranteed a successful run against China's coastal headwinds up to Canton. There, the clipper captains sold the opium to British and American wholesalers. A secure if complex system of Chinese brokers, corrupt officials, dealers and distributors ensured a ready market. Mandarins were so closely involved that the official anti-smuggling vessels – and even, on occasion, the Emperor's own junks – were used to deliver the "foreign mud," as the Chinese called the drug.



Each of the solid, wooden chests which the Indian workers carried out of the factories contained up to 140 pounds of opium – enough to supply some 650 addicts for a year.

The waterfront at Canton, with its line of European-owned warehouses, was one grand rendezvous for opium vessels.

Ashore, Chinese dealers prised open the chests, scrutinized the opium for its quality, weighed it out and sold it off.

The owner of an opium den directs his workers as they cut up opium balls and mix the drug with tobacco for smoking.

The Smokers' Den

When the opium finally arrived at the opium dens, it was prepared for and sold to addicts in a procedure depicted in the Chinese paintings shown here. Owners would direct their workers to boil the drug in huge jugs of water and scoop off the impurities which floated to the surface. The purified opium – usually mixed with tobacco – was then divided into pipe-bowl-size portions. It was now ready to be roasted over a naked flame, carefully inserted in the pipe and handed over to the waiting customer. Holding the pipe over a small lamp to burn the drug, the addict drew the smoke deep into his lungs and within a few minutes was lying back on his wooden couch in a euphoric haze.

Such was the procedure which by the 1830s had become a major menace to the Chinese Empire. Aside from the disastrous effect on the health and family life of opium smokers – 12 million of them – the country was being steadily impoverished as silver to pay for the drug flowed into the Europeans' pockets.

Opium dens ranged from the cheap (above), with little more than plain couches for the smokers, to more lavish ones (below) with statuettes, decoration and a degree of social formality.

"The Common Sink of All Iniquity"

The first efforts to crush the trade were useless: the decapitation of a dealer or a sudden raid on an opium vessel had at best a short-lived effect. Threats, pleas and propaganda – like the picture below – utterly failed to persuade smokers to give up the drug and destroy equipment.

Only in 1839, when the Emperor ordered to Canton the self-confident, arrogant and ambitious civil servant Lin Tse-hsü did the ineffective appeals of previous years acquire some teeth. "Opium is the common sink of all iniquity," he thundered, but far from halting the trade, Lin's uncompromising attitude involved his country in even worse catastrophe: war. Thereafter, foreign domination and Chinese weakness allowed the trade to flourish until well into the 20th Century.

A wife chops up her husband's opium pipe while he sits dejectedly on his couch. This propaganda picture, in which the wife's action is saving both husband and family from ruin, was included in the Emperor's many ineffectual anti-opium campaigns.

III. The "Barbarians" Sweep to Victory

The English Trade Superintendent, Captain Charles Elliot, neither backed nor controlled the opium smugglers. His powers were vague, his ammunition blank. Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary, had instructed the first Canton superintendent, Lord Napier, in 1834: "It is not desirable that you should encourage such adventures [as opium-smuggling]; but you must never lose sight of the fact that you have no authority to interfere with or protect them." This waffling directive typified Britain's lack of a coherent opium policy; but Palmerston's vacillation put Captain Elliot in a dilemma. He could neither placate nor convincingly defy the Chinese authorities.

The situation drifted. The opium dealers were cheered by a Peking official, Hsu Nai Tsi, who proposed legalizing their trade. Hsu's realistic argument was that, since the trade could not be stopped, it was better to admit the drug, tax it, and stop the outflow of silver bullion by making opium saleable only by barter. But the Emperor, convinced that his edicts expressed the Will of Heaven, sacked Hsu. Meanwhile, the imperial Viceroy in Canton, sent to end the trade, had become as corruptly involved as the merchants; but to deceive the Emperor, he made a great show of executing a number of Chinese opium dealers. This did nothing to stop the drug piling up in the hulks, but it did throw the Cantonese market into panic. Early in December, 1838, the Viceroy got another imperial reprimand and to vindicate himself he seized a few chests of opium and ordered the expulsion of two notorious opium traders, one of them William Jardine, head of Jardine, Matheson & Company.

Reading the omens, Jardine decided that only war would protect English trade in Canton. On January 26, 1839, he sailed for England to tell Lord Palmerston so. Meanwhile, the unfortunate Captain Elliot did all he could with his circumscribed and vague powers: fearing the crisis would ruin *all* British trade, and worried about the safety of whites in Canton, he closed the warehouses, assured the Chinese Government that there would be "no intervention" on behalf of smugglers – a prediction that could not have been more erroneous – and cleared the Canton River of opium ships.

Though business resumed a month later, the English merchants were not happy with Captain Elliot. His action might commit the British government to back *any* anti-opium measure the Chinese imposed. New Year's Day, 1839, was a cheerless feast for whites in Canton. Irascible memos were arriving from the Vermilion Pencil of the Celestial Throne, proclaiming, among other things, the death penalty for opium smoking; the Viceroy was dashing nervously about, lopping Chinese necks to mollify imperial wrath; and the imperial High Commissioner, with a rank equal, in Chinese terms, to that of the English Viceroy of India, and equipped with plenipotentiary powers to stamp out the opium trade, was on his way south from Peking. And to make matters worse, trade was slack.

Lin Tse-hsü, the imperial Commissioner, came with his retinue into Canton on March 10, 1839. This formidable man had emerged from poverty to become one of the most powerful scholar-officials in imperial China, rising through a succession of provincial posts to the governor-generalship of Kiangman and Kiangsi provinces. He was 54 years old, frugal, tough and wily, and he distrusted barbarians. From the moment he arrived in Canton he assumed that nothing they said could be relied on. This led him to treat the English with summary brusqueness, for he was determined to get results. He told the Canton traders what he was going to do. But then he *did* it, which left the English, used to years of paper threats from Peking, flabbergasted. Lin saw no point in wasting time; worse, he was unbribable. When the whites found he could not be mollified their reaction to Lin passed from scepticism, through incredulity, to an alarmed respect.

Commissioner Lin spent his first week in Canton probing the opium trade and issuing orders to the Chinese. On March 18, he sent his demand to the English traders, through the Chinese guild-merchants. (He had told these *hong* merchants in advance that, if they obstructed his will, he would select one or two of them and confiscate all their property.) It was an ultimatum, and the English thought it grossly peremptory: Commissioner Lin, of course, did not, since the penal laws of the Manchu dynasty made it clear that barbarians, in China, came under Chinese law.

First, all opium in foreign hands, whether in the shore warehouses, the depot hulks or the clippers, must be handed over for destruction. "There must not be the smallest item concealed or withheld." Second, the barbarians must sign a bond never to import opium again, and recognize that if anyone did he would "suffer the extreme rigour of the law" – decapitation.

Captain Elliot was away in Macao. The British Chamber of Commerce, realizing that Lin was serious (but not *how* serious) offered a token: they would hand over 1,000 chests of opium. Lin briskly rejected this sop and asked to be visited by Lancelot Dent, the head of Dent & Company, the biggest Eastern trader after Jardine, Matheson and, Lin thought, the worst implicated in opium.

Four days had now passed and the opium had not been surrendered: Lin concluded that Dent was playing for time. But Dent was in earnest; he refused to enter Canton and formally agree to Lin's terms. Lin now threatened to bring Dent to the city by force, and he began to assemble Chinese troops on the Canton River. Whampoa was cut off. Still Dent would not come, but by March 24 Lin had lost interest in him, since he had concluded that the key man in the situation was not Dent but Elliot.

Elliot returned from Macao on the 24th, to find armed junks stationed at all the Canton quays to prevent barbarians from sailing or disembarking; Lin had also decreed that all loading or unloading of goods was to stop, and that craftsmen or servants in British employ were to quit or be prosecuted for conducting "secret relations with foreign countries." Deprived of their cooks and nannies, the English families muddled on, boiling their own eggs and cursing Peking. By the evening of the 24th, when Elliot dropped anchor off the warehouses, Lin had surrounded the foreigners' compound with soldiers. The English were now imprisoned; no messages could get in or out, except by Lin's permission; and Elliot realized that he, as Trade Superintendent,

was in Lin's eyes guilty of sheltering the smugglers. The whole foreign community in Canton was hostage for the opium.

So poor Elliot, victim of Whitehall's hypocritical shilly-shallying, armed with no power (a fact which Lin did not believe) and, in fact, personally opposed to opium smuggling, did the only thing he could: he gave in. There was no time to consult Palmerston, but Elliot not only agreed to hand over the opium but also committed the government to indemnify the opium traders for their loss. (The opium scrip Elliot issued to English merchants was to be a source of dispute for years.) In fact, Elliot bought the opium from the traders on behalf of Her Majesty's Government, and on March 27, he agreed to give it to Lin.

All the opium in the Canton area – 20,283 chests – was now theoretically in Lin's hands. The first part of his task was done. The second, the utter suppression of all future trade, remained. Commissioner Lin sent his new demands to Elliot, who read them with horror. Her Majesty's Government must not only withdraw from the Chinese opium trade, but stop making opium; any vessel carrying opium in Chinese waters would be confiscated and its officers "be left to suffer death at the hands of the Celestial Court." The Trade Superintendent condemned it as a "monstrous instrument" which no Englishman could sign.

Elliot wrote to Palmerston. "If ever we are free the more practical and fit reply will be the withdrawal of all the Queen's subjects from the grasp of this Government." (The British in Canton were still hostages; Lin would not let them go until the opium had been delivered, and he did not trust the barbarians to honour Elliot's formal surrender of the drug stocks.) And so it happened that Lin's rigid distrust of the English had turned Elliot irrevocably against the Chinese. On April 3, he wrote another dispatch to Palmerston, asking him to reply "to all these unjust violences . . . in the form of a swift and heavy blow unprefaced by one word of written communication." In short, an undeclared war, a pre-emptive strike.

Unaware of this, Lin destroyed the opium. It was first deposited at the Bogue (the mouth of the Canton River), 50 miles from Canton. Through April and early May, the chests piled up, and the organizational problems of supervising the surrender slowly unknotted. Lin found time to paint couplets on fans, and to spend long dinners discussing literature with the imperial Admiral, Kuan Ti, whom he believed to be directly descended from the Chinese God of War.

On June 3, 1839, Lin's workers began to destroy the opium. It was broken up and melted in a huge vat, disinfected with lime, and sluiced into the Canton estuary. The stench was atrocious, and to placate the Sea Spirit Lin wrote and recited a ceremonial address: "may the Spirit warn the fish in time, may its influence tame the bestial nature of the foreigners and teach them the Way."

The stink that rose from the vat confirmed Lin's belief that the English had, as part of some nefarious plan to weaken the Chinese, adulterated the opium with the rotting flesh of immense crows, which, as was well known, grew several feet high in England and were allowed to eat human corpses. (Myths of this sort were common in China; another version was that English opium was grown on gravepits, and mixed with the decayed flesh of feathered serpents which infested the Indian skies.) It took 20 days to destroy the opium, but at last it was all done; not an ounce of the drug remained, officially, in Canton, at the ports of the estuary, or in British holds.

But all Lin had done was kill the trade at Canton; by October, 1839, more than 15 opium ships were running the drug to Chusan and other ports north and east of the city. Within nine months of Elliot's submission, 8,000 new chests were smuggled into China. It was an unpluggable flow. Captain Elliot had no complicity in it, and indeed he forced British captains to make depositions to him, under oath, that they were not carrying opium. But objectively, Lin had failed. Nor did he manage to stop the Chinese consumption. In May, 1840, he went so far as to set up a clinic outside Canton where addicts could try to break their habit in voluntary confinement, tapering off with other and harmless drugs – a surprisingly modern notion; but there were few volunteers, and the death penalty, as always, failed to deter the addicts.

The English were wholly outraged by Lin's brusqueness, his "excessive" demands, and his imprisonment of the Canton traders and their families. Palmerston's letter to Elliot of November 4, 1839, agreed that Lin's methods were "unfair" and his indiscriminate pressure on the whole British community in Canton a bellicose act which cried out for revenge. He would act, he said, "towards the Chinese in the manner in which the Chinese are wont to proceed themselves – that is, to begin by striking a Blow, and to give explanations afterwards."

Thus echoing Elliot's own words, Palmerston and the foreign office prepared for war: but at a leisurely pace. The issue was not even debated in the House of Commons until March 19, 1840, when Lord John Russell, as leader of the House, announced that the government backed Elliot's plea for gunboats and would send troops in to get (*a*) reparations for the insult to British subjects in Canton, (*b*) payment for the 20,283 chests of opium destroyed, and (*c*) a firm treaty of security for China traders. Naturally, while the government insisted it was going to war to avenge an insult to Britain, the Opposition – represented by Gladstone – made heavy political capital out of the false morality of opium dealing.

But the first actions in the Opium War had in fact been fought seven months before. On September 4, there was a skirmish between British and Chinese ships in the Canton estuary – the "Battle of Kowloon," which the Chinese claimed as a resounding victory. (As far as can be determined, nobody won it, and hardly anyone was hurt.) And on November 3, a more serious engagement took place off Chuenpi, when the warships *Volage* and *Hyacinth*, carrying English refugees from Canton, were set on by a fleet of war junks. Again, both sides claimed to have won; the evidence is that the Chinese lost, for some dozen of their ships were sunk, and the fleet (the largest naval force the Chinese had deployed in years) was sent running by two English frigates. It was a taste of what was to come after the British expeditionary force arrived, which, on June 21, 1840, it did.

For the gap between the two forces was

enormous. The Chinese had no idea of what they were facing, and the generals' contempt for barbarians clouded their never very acute power of strategic planning. One need only "display the celestial terror" and the barbarians would run. If they ran, one adviser told the Emperor, they would trip; and everyone knew that the soldiers of this "insignificant and detestable race," weakened by "the ravages of our climate," were so tightly buttoned in their quaint uniforms that, once down, they could never get up.

Chinese officers even took the English musket for a sign of weakness: the barbarians did not use the bow, thus showing the disregard for ritual and precedent without which no army could work. Chinese cities were protected by guns some of which, exquisitely cast in bronze, dated from the early 14th Century. The Chinese navy barely existed; and although a Chinese had invented the steam turbine 2,000 years earlier, the sight of a British paddlewheeler was so novel that the imperial sailors were thunderstruck when they saw it.

The Chinese marines were constantly seasick, and the army was so riddled with graft that gunners on a battery overlooking the Canton estuary were found to be using a mixture of 30 per cent gunpowder and 70 per cent sand. They had sold the rest to British smugglers. According to Commissioner Lin, the Canton marines got 1 per cent of their income from official pay, the rest in bribes from opium smugglers. "So," he concluded sadly, "it is hardly surprising that they do not resist the English very vigorously."

Moreover, Chinese intelligence reports were useless, because the officers put in fabulously puffed claims of enemy casualties in order to get promotion: this was accepted as normal in Peking, and the Emperor attached little more than ritual meaning to the reports he got. Even the rigorous Lin claimed China won the "Battle of Kowloon," sinking a bark and killing 40 foreign devils; in fact, no English ships sank, there were but four casualties (none fatal).

A comic-opera war? Perhaps; but the blood was real. On June 21, the British expeditionary force appeared off Macao: 20 warships carrying 4,000 troops, epitomizing Lord Palmerston's gunboat diplomacy. It hove to for a few days and then sailed away – to the relief of the Cantonese, who thought the fleet had been deterred by Commissioner Lin's new forts and batteries and had gone home.

They were wrong: the British had sailed north to attack the port of Ting-hai, on Chusan island.

The people of Ting-hai had no hint of British plans, so they did not realize that the craft which stood off their port on July 5 were warships: they assumed they were opium vessels, and were delighted that the British had at last moved the focus of their trade from Canton to Chusan. They "guffawed with joy" and got out the red carpet. Then the fleet opened fire. Nine minutes later, under the broadsides of 15 cruisers, most of Ting-hai was rubble. English troops landed and swept through the town and its outlying farms, looting, raping and foraging – the inhabitants, a British diarist noted, "in a thousand instances received great injustice at our hands."

After this, however, the Opium War became a curiously sporadic affair; it was not a matter of large armies battling, breaking, re-forming and attacking again, but rather of random engagements in slow motion, as between walkers under water. The English occupied Chusan – which, one may recall, they had wanted as their own trading port since the late 18th Century.

Finally, on August 20, 1840, the Emperor in Peking got a letter from Lord Palmerston, which had been written six months earlier in response to Captain Elliot's report from Canton dated November, 1839 – a lapse of nine months. Palmerston made five main demands. Confiscated opium was to be paid for by the Chinese. The Chinese must communicate with British officials in a "civilized" manner – as equals. The Chinese Government must pay the Cantonese guild-merchants' debt to English traders. British war costs must be indemnified. And lastly, a "sufficiently large and properly situated island" must become a permanent Crown possession. The island Palmerston probably had in mind was Chusan. What England eventually got was the island of Hong Kong.

A Chinese junk explodes as the paddle-steamer *Nemesis* blasts clear the way up-river to Canton. In two hours, the implacable British killed 500 Chinese with no losses to themselves.

Naturally, the Emperor refused. And, on October 13, exasperated by Lin's failure to suppress the opium trade, and blaming him for the diplomatic nightmare which had unleashed the barbarian navy on China, he stripped Lin of his rank as governor-general and summoned him to trial in Peking. Another official, Ch'i-shan, was appointed in his place.

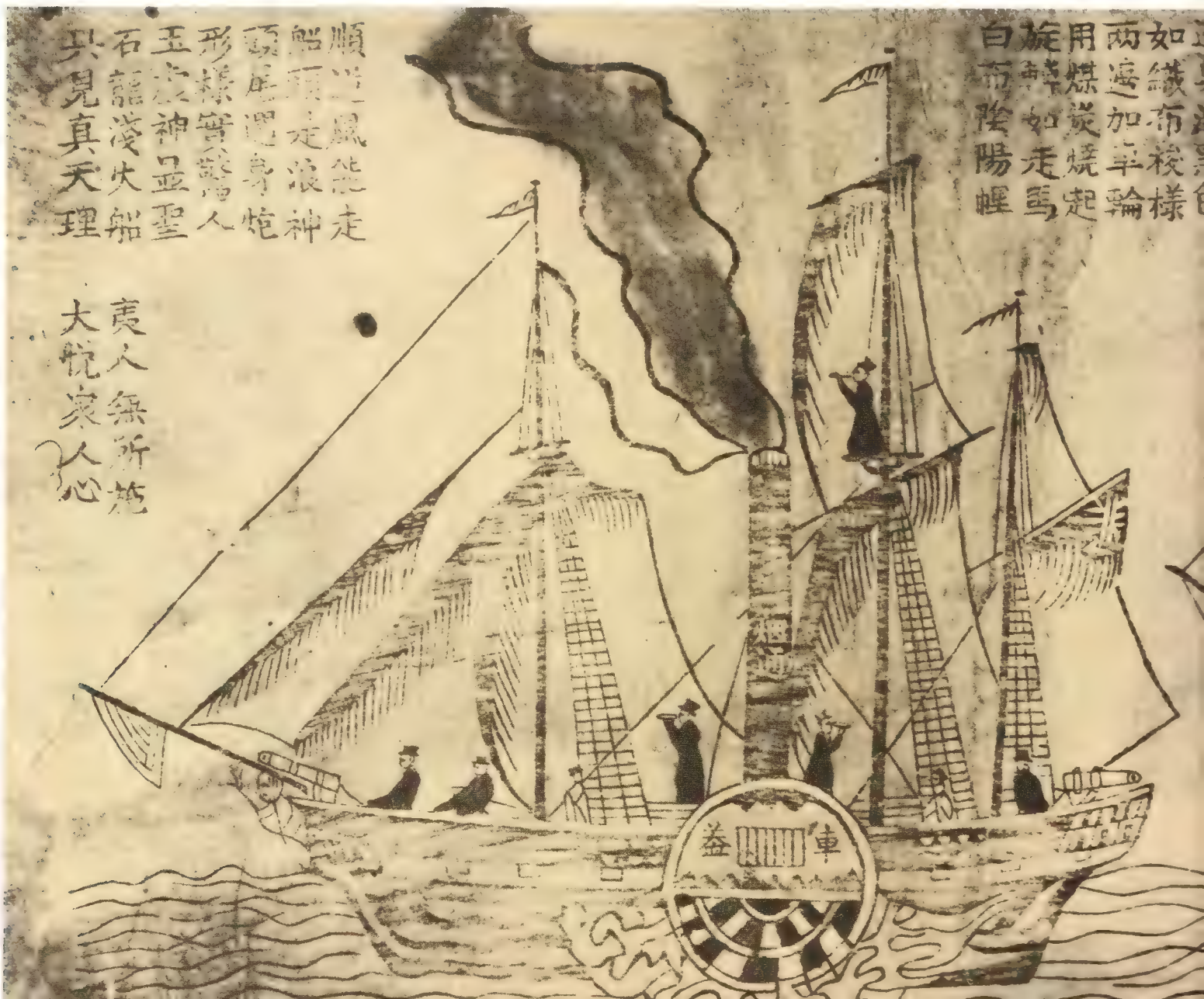
But it was clear by now who was on top. On January 7, 1841, the English fleet struck at the main defences of the Canton estuary, the forts at Taikok and Shakok. These fell: within 24 hours most of the Chinese fleet had been annihilated, and the War God's descendant, Admiral Kuan, had asked for truce.

It was symbolic of China's humiliation that the Admiral, to stop his remaining troops deserting, had to pawn his clothes to raise a two-dollar bonus for each man. Canton was at England's mercy, and negotiations on Palmerston's demands began afresh between Captain Elliot and Ch'i-shan. But now a secret dispatch came from the Emperor: Ch'i-shan must break off all parley with the barbarians, for some 4,000 imperial troops were on their way to Canton, where they would cut the English to rags.

This put Ch'i-shan in a suicidal quandary. If he kept negotiating, it would be treason – disobedience to the Emperor. If he did not, the barbarians would occupy Canton within a few days. He chose the former alternative, and on January 18, 1841, Captain Elliot was given a signed agreement, by which the harbour and island of Hong Kong became the property of the British Crown. Poor Ch'i-shan then gave a banquet for the English officers on a slope overlooking the river, where the details of an agreement (known as the Convention of Chuenpi) were settled. On hearing of this, the Emperor was apoplectic. He condemned Ch'i-shan to death and had him brought in chains to Peking. But having seized Ch'i-shan's fortune of £10 million and his 425,000 acres of land, the Emperor allowed him to live on in exile and to survive – like Lin, now in disgrace in the wastes of Turkestan – to return to imperial service years later. Once again, the ever-hopeful Emperor sent a trio of officials to Canton to "destroy the foreigners." Two were his own cousins; the third was a stone-deaf septuagenarian general named Yang Feng.

The 20 English warships continued their advance up the estuary, their guns blasting the way for the landing parties which took fort after fort; Admiral Kuan died, bayoneted, and on March 18 Canton was under fire. The English landed and occupied the wharves and foreign factories. Two days later Yang Feng, faced

The caption on this drawing of British warships, which appeared in Canton soon after the British victory in May, 1841, did its b



with a hopeless military situation and an empty city (nine Cantonese out of ten had fled) obtained a truce – hoping that this would trick the English into withdrawing downriver. But on May 21, Her Majesty's fleet destroyed the last defences of Canton; the English demanded, and got, a bribe of £600,000 on the understanding they would spare the city and leave.

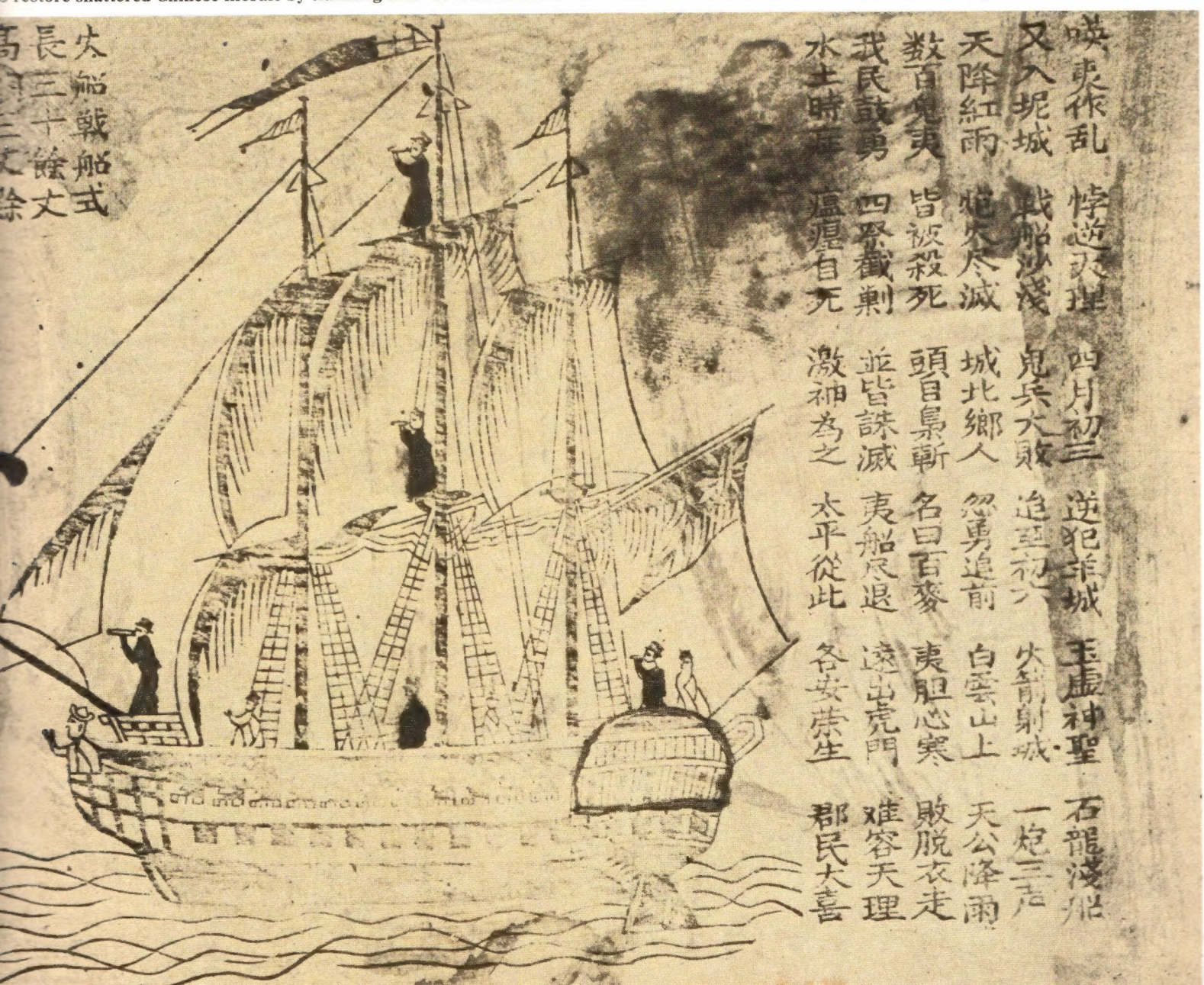
Captain Elliot and most of the foreign merchants were quite content with these arrangements. But in London, the Company's Court of Directors and the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, were mortified. Palmerston castigated Elliot for failing to demand a sum that would cover not only compensation for the opium losses but also the whole cost of the campaign. The cession of Hong Kong – "a barren island" – was no substitute for hard cash. "You seem," Palmerston wrote scathingly to Elliot, "to have considered my Instructions were Waste Paper," and then sacked him.

In August, 1841, English troops (reinforced by detachments of the Indian army) began moving north towards Peking, rolling the Chinese back before them and sacking the coastal towns. Chenhai, on the mainland opposite Chusan island, fell in October, as did Ningpo.

At Ningpo, the bluff, kindly old commander, Sir Hugh Gough, who had arrived with the Indian army detachments, did his best to control unnecessary violence. But despite a Chinese police force set up to prevent looting, empty houses were broken up for firewood, shops plundered and the largest temple turned into a barracks.

Meanwhile, the Chinese planned a counter-attack. As befitted a military adventure, it was planned to take place on the Day of the Tiger (March 10) and at the Hour of the Tiger (between 3.00 p.m. and 5.00 p.m.). There was little attempt at secrecy: in the morning, all the Chinese began to leave the town, drawing their hands across their throats and pointing to the British soldiers. When the attack came, it was, for the Chinese a tragic failure. Seeing that the gate of the city was open, 3,500 Chinese rushed forward – straight into a well-laid minefield. British troops rushed round the outside of the walls to tackle those who fled. Other Chinese who managed to enter the town thronged into a straight street blocked by cannon, which fired point-blank into the oncoming troops. Soon the dead lay five and six deep, blocking the street as the British clambered over them to harry the remnants of the army across the countryside, where the country people, apparently unmoved by the fate of the Chinese troops, lined bridges, hillocks

o restore shattered Chinese morale by claiming that "several hundred devil-like barbarians were killed and the chief decapitated."



and roadsides to get a better view of the calamitous retreat.

In May, having spent the winter in Ningpo, the British moved on northwards. In Chapu, south of Shanghai, they were held up briefly by 300 ferocious Tartars, who used a temple as a fortress. They only evacuated the building when it was set on fire; then rather than submit, many soldiers – and their families – committed suicide by hanging, poisoning, drowning or slitting their own throats. It was a scene often repeated during the British advance northwards.

Shanghai, at the mouth of the Yangtze River, fell to them in June. They turned inland, up the Yangtze, and captured Chinkiang a month later. Chinkiang's prefect, General Hai-lin, cracked under the strain and had most of his Manchu troops scouring the alleys for traitors when they should have been manning the walls; at the end, he burnt himself to death on a pyre of official papers.

With this, Chinese resistance ended. The British sailed into Nanking in August, and their squadron was closely followed up the Yangtze by a gaggle of opium vessels. On August 29, 1842, the Treaty of Nanking was signed and the Opium War was over.

The Chinese had little left to bargain with and England wrote its own treaty. First, there was payment for the opium Lin had destroyed in 1839, at £30 a chest – £600,000. When the Chinese, who imagined that the £600,000 they had already paid in Canton was an opium indemnity, protested, they were unctuously told that considering the time and inconvenience, not to speak of compound interest, £1,200,000 was a fair sum. The final indemnity China had to pay was in fact over £2,000,000.

Canton was opened to foreign (mainly British) trade, and four new "treaty ports" with it: Nanking, Ningpo, Foochow and Amoy. At all of these, England had unrestricted business facilities and full diplomatic equality. Finally, the cession of Hong Kong was made official by the Nanking Treaty. It became a Crown colony; this unpromising, bare rock – which neither Elliot nor Palmerston much wanted to begin with – would be transformed, by the sheer weight of British presence, into a vital strategic and trading port, the Gibraltar of the Far East. The supplementary Treaty of the Bogue, in July, 1843, recognized Britain as "most-favoured nation."

An incisive French comment on the Opium War shows a determined British admiral forcing opium down an unresisting Chinese.

The one matter not dealt with in the treaty was opium. China, having no power to stop it, tacitly agreed that the trade would go on. In Hong Kong, Britain had a legal and immune staging-post for opium. After the defeat, no Chinese war junk was likely to attack the huge opium stations, both floating and shore-based, that now proliferated along the Chinese coast. The drug was still *officially* illegal and it suited the British government to keep it so: thus it could meet moral criticism with the sophistry that its responsibility for opium ended at the Calcutta docks, and protect the smugglers with the Royal Navy while virtuously deploring their trade. The growth of that trade was huge. India's exports of opium to China soared from 2,000 tons in 1843 to nearly 5,000 in 1866; by then, it was computed by British observers that eight out of ten adult Chinese in Fukien province, and nine out of ten in Canton, smoked the drug.

For the British Empire, the Opium War was a complete success. It vindicated Palmerston's faith in the gunboat. Through its hold on the treaty ports and Hong Kong, Britain became master of the Far East. For the Chinese Empire, the war was disaster. The last empire of the ancient world, with 4,000 years of accumulated history, had been assailed – as so often in the past – by barbarians. The Celestial Throne had once more unfurled its scrolls and orders; the Ineffable Dragon, whose very scales glittering in the smoke could strike men helpless with awe, huffed fire on the round-eyed interlopers; and total defeat followed.

China could not face the reality of this defeat. Instead, its people, and especially its ruling elite, retreated into self-isolation, and clung to their traditional, Confucian world-view because they could imagine nothing else. All change would be for the worst, they felt; and indeed, had China tried to modernize herself, the Confucian idea of "nationality" would have been lost. Thus the Chinese could not grasp the meaning of their loss – which was that Western capitalism, with its immense technological thrust, had made their own culture obsolete. The Chinese scholar-officials, on whom this blow fell, were by no means stupid; they were, rather, numbed turtles dying on the beach of evolution, blinking their myopic eyes and wondering where the sea had gone.

Nothing, after the Treaty of Nanking, could reverse the collapse of Imperial China; and nothing has let the Chinese forget it. And it is doubly ironical that while the import of the war was lost on the Chinese themselves for 50 years, Japan grasped it at once. If Japan could not modernize on Western lines, it would go down like China. And China only understood what had happened when its armies were crushed by Japan's in 1895. The mandarins could not treat the Japanese as barbarians with an invincible yet culturally irrelevant technology. The links between Peking and Tokyo were too many and too old to permit any attempt at self-deception.

China's humiliation was now complete. Her future dealings with the West were, naturally enough, marked by a well-founded paranoia; but what is not so generally realized is that the Opium War served as archetype of white perfidy for all Far Easterners, but especially for Japan. Against the wily Occidental, the best possible defence would be a pre-emptive strike. If the Opium War thrust China on its way towards Communism, it also, in a psychological sense, pointed the Japanese towards Pearl Harbor.

Late Georgian semi-formal afternoon dress, 1787

IN NEXT WEEK'S ISSUE

RAFFLES OF SINGAPORE
BROOKE OF SARAWAK